COME ON, TIGER.
ONE DRINK. WHAT HAVE YOU GOT TO LOSE?

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Summary:

Based on my Hunting!Spider AU!

After a synthetic drug made from his venom ravaged the world, Peter Parker was willing to pay any price to set things right and give everyone a clean start. He just wasn't expecting to be included in that bargain, transported to a new reality where Peter, and by extension, Spiderman, never existed. So how's a washed-up superhero supposed to carve a space in a world where he doesn't officially exist? By starting somewhere that doesn't ask any questions. Sister Margaret's Bar for Wayward Children has a reputation for looking the other way.

They also happen to need a bartender.

Deadpool comes back from a job to find a new face manning the bar at his favorite watering hole. Peter Parker is hot, funny, and obviously hiding something, and Wade's always been a sucker for a good mystery- especially if he's the one who gets to unravel it.

Too bad there's a new superhero on the block who's making it his job to get on Deadpool's last nerve.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

> This is a fic based on my Hunting!Spider AU, where you can find more info on the master post for the lore here!

Peter hasn't worn the suit since he got here. He hasn't done much in the last two months of his new existence beyond haunting New York like a phantom, trying to figure out who he is and where he stands in a reality that hasn't been unfortunate enough to have a Peter Parker in the first place.

Or a Spider-Man.

Strange hadn't been kidding about the magic. Peter feels like the victim of his hubris, asking for a clean start: a world where no one knows him. He'd asked, and he'd been delivered.

Almost.

The world is there, technically, but it's like looking at a painting he's seen a thousand times only to realize the details are off. It's the phones with the home button on the bottom, the different slang, the green money, all his favorite songs with wildly different lyrics, so many painful differences— a slow death by a thousand cuts.

Peter thought it would be easier, like a new beginning stretching out ahead of him, the sea-breeze smell of a fresh start after stepping out of Ryker's.

But Uncle Ben isn't waiting for him at the docks this time. Nothing is waiting except the uncanny arms of a city that used to know him. Like running into an ex after years apart, recognizing the same general shape, but being strangers all the same.

Damn it. Peter should have asked Strange to take his memories, too.

At least then Peter would know what to do with himself instead of

haunting his old patrol routes in Brooklyn at night like a ghost, fighting the cognitive dissonance of taking turns he used to know like the back of his hand, only to be startled when they lead into dead-ends or open out into streets that shouldn't exist.

That's why he hasn't worn the suit. Because forget being Spider-Man, who the hell is Peter here?

His melancholy is interrupted by a woman's voice, faint if not for Peter's enhanced senses.

"Listen, you're a sweet guy, but I don't like mixing work and my personal life." The voice is extra sweet in the way women get when trying to talk themselves out of a dangerous situation.

His body changes course without input, beelining towards the source with silence that's more instinct than experience. He sticks to the shadows, easily avoiding the few flickering streetlights between him and the alleyway.

His night vision pierces the darkness, tracing down the detailed shape of the tall, lanky man cornering a woman in the middle of the alley.

He's leaning, off-balance, clearly drunk, and boxing her in with one leather-clad arm, "Come on, Scarlett. Been asking for your number for weeks. Just one date, give a guy a chance, huh?"

Well, it was comforting to know that no matter the timeline, scum remained scum.

"Paul, you're wasted." The woman– Scarlett– is draped against the wall, seemingly at ease and deceptively loose-limbed, even as she fists a set of keys between her knuckles. "Why don't we have this discussion somewhere a little nicer? There's a cute cafe that's open tomorrow-"

"Fuck that. It's always one excuse after another with you," The guy– Paul– snarls, swaying from one foot to the other. His frustration is a ticking bomb. "Why are you bein' such a fucking bitch?"

Like clockwork, the slurs come out, and a peaceful resolution is no longer an option.

Scarlett realizes it, too, because the hum of anxiety lacing her syrupy-sweet tone bleeds into her body. Her muscles lock, visibly entering fight or flight.

The air is suddenly saturated with the sickly-thick scent of her fear. That's Peter's cue.

"Is there a problem?" Peter's voice is like a knife in the dark, popping the bubble and making the two flinch.

"Who the fuck are you?" Paul sneers, face slack and ugly from drink. "The fuck you think you're doing butting in?"

Peter ignores him, glancing towards Scarlett, who flicks her eyes between them and the rest of the alleyway. Unfortunately, there's only one entrance, and he's blocking it. Out of options, Scarlett plasters herself to the wall.

"This is between the lady and me." Paul is still talking, stumbling towards Peter. The familiar mix of beer and aggression is, oddly enough, comforting. "But I'm a nice guy, so I'm going to give you a chance to turn 'round and walk away."

"Generous, but I'll have to decline," Peter murmurs and closes the distance, invading Paul's space before the man can even blink. The promise of violence always lights something in Peter's stomach, but for all the man's shit-talking, the fight, if it can even be called that, is pathetic. Paul is so drunk Peter's almost sick with the aftertaste, and his spider-sense doesn't even bother kicking in as he dodges one wobbly punch after the other.

There's no point in dragging it out.

It only takes one good fist to the gut to drop Paul to the ground, followed by one good kick to the chest to keep him there.

The aftermath is anticlimactic, awkward silence punctuated only by the rattling wheeze of the incapacitated man beneath him.

Even pulling his punches, Peter probably cracked his ribs. He hacks a wet cough, vomiting bile, and booze all over the floor. It would take more effort than he's got to feel sorry, especially since Scarlett is still

glued to the wall, eyes trained on him and practically vibrating with adrenaline.

Slowly, Peter creates some space, backing out of the alleyway so he's not obstructing the exit. "You gonna be alright?"

"Yeah." Her reply is curt and wary, but Peter isn't offended. He knows what he looks like, looming in the dark with his ratty clothes and unkempt beard. Best thing he can do to convince her of her safety is to walk away.

So he does just that, almost halfway down the block by the time she's done calling an ambulance. He's about to turn the corner when he hears her behind him, chasing him in heels that echo in the chill night air. "Wait!"

Peter pauses, turning around.

Scarlett stops a few meters away, clutching the strap of her gym bag over her chest. "Sorry. That was rude of me. Thank you."

Under the streetlights, her face is striking. Her bright green eyes are smoky and sensual, with bold cheekbones and dark lips framed by wisps of red hair falling out of a messy bun. She's exactly the type of woman Peter would fantasize about back in Ryker's, the kind he would see on pinups in Marko's cell— tall and feminine, with lean legs and a waist Peter could span with both hands.

She *feels* familiar, and it makes Peter's stomach churn to think about it. So he doesn't.

"Don't worry about it," Peter responds with a shrug. He's not stupid enough to lecture a grown woman about walking the streets at night. There's an awkward pause, and he shifts, uncomfortable. "Was there something else?"

Scarlett chews on her lip, eyes flicking back to the alley before settling on Peter for a few long beats. Whatever she sees in him makes her sigh, and some of the tension leeches from her shoulders. "Feel like walking a girl to her job?"

He's caught off guard at the request but takes a second to consider–

mostly so he doesn't seem threatening. "Sure," he says as nonchalantly as possible. "Where to?"

"Maggie's." At his confused look, she raises a brow. "Sister Margaret's?"

Still not ringing a bell. "Is that a…church?" He doesn't remember any Sister Margaret in his Brooklyn, and it just reinforces that fish-out-of-water feeling that's been choking him for the past few months.

"It sure is," Scarlett snorts derisively, laughing under her breath. When Peter doesn't join in, she shoots him a wide-eyed look. "Oh. You're serious. It's a dance bar. But it did actually used to be a church."

Walking at night makes more sense now. That, and the obvious stage name. "Ok. But I don't know where that is. I'm…kind of new in town."

"With *that* accent?" Scarlett raises a brow, and Peter feels a flush creeping up his neck. *Right.* He's suddenly painfully aware of his Queen's twang.

Thankfully, Scarlett drops the subject and they fall in step. Peter keeps his strides short and even, always in her line of sight as they make their way through the streets. Her gold hoops glint under the lights and she's still got her keys between her knuckles, though they're no longer clutched in a tight fist. "So, Mr. Good Samaritan-"

"Peter," he corrects. Even his name feels out of place in the cold night air, as if simply saying it aloud is going to out him as someone who doesn't belong.

But Scarlett is still walking beside him, completely unaware. "Nice to meet you, Peter." She smiles at him, and Peter's mouth tugs in helpless response. "My name is Emma. Thanks for the assist."

"Not like I was gonna just stand by and watch."

They're heading down the street, taking a turn on 81st that should have led into a main thoroughfare but doesn't, instead turning into another little set of streets full of gated-off shops covered in graffiti.

Even the gang signs don't look the same. He tries not to dwell on it.

Thankfully, Emma keeps chattering, "Yeah, but I didn't think it was going to get that far. Paul's always been a pushy bastard, but I thought it was all drunk bravado. Guys say a lot of things when they've got upwards of seven shots in them." Her mouth twists. "I never believed he'd actually follow me. I'm glad you were there, but sorry you had to resort to violence."

Resorting to violence is one of Peter's favorite pastimes, but that's not something someone admits out loud when walking a woman to her job in the middle of the night. Instead, he hums, tucking his hands into his stained hoodie. "Some people only listen when fists are talking. Hopefully, the lesson sticks." Peter thinks for a moment. "Do you carry anything like a taser or mace?"

"Both, actually." She pats her gym bag. "But when Paul pulled me into the alleyway, I just-"

"Froze?" Peter interrupts because the acrid scent of shame is creeping into her tone. "Don't blame yourself. When it comes to dangerous situations, people think that it's either fight or flight, but freezing is a pretty common threat response." He nods towards her bag. "It'll take some time, but you can condition yourself into reacting differently. Ideally, you should try to avoid those kinds of situations in the first place."

"Avoiding bad situations…I never thought about it that way." Emma's tone is wry, amused. "Any other sage wisdom?"

Peter's flush returns with a vengeance. "Sorry, I didn't mean to imply-"

"That it was my fault that I was followed by a man who couldn't take 'no' for an answer? Gee, *thanks, mister*."

Peter should have just kept walking. He should have kept walking and turned the corner when he had the chance. He could've been sulking on a rooftop somewhere instead of being roasted alive in the middle of January by a woman half his size.

He hasn't really talked to anyone in a while, and the rust is really starting to show. Thankfully, Emma's tone is teasing, more amused than insulted by his shitty conversational skills.

Peter thinks for a second, then frowns. "You said he followed you. Does that mean he knows where you live?"

Entitled men like Paul tended to hold grudges.

"Thank god, no." She shudders next to him, gripping the strap of her bag a little tighter at the thought. "He caught me coming from my day job. I'll have to tell Weasel to put him on the blacklist for the club, though…and change my shift. Ugh."

Peter nods in sympathy. Shifting schedules between two jobs is going to be a nightmare. "Weasel?"

"The owner of Maggie's," she clarifies.

"Your boss is named Weasel?" Yikes.

"Yeah," she laughs, anticipating his line of thought. "But don't let the name fool you. He's weird, but he's decent. There are lots of other clubs in the area, but Weas lets us have a bigger cut than most other places. Plus, we get to set our own rules."

They cross the street, avoiding some dark patches where the streetlights had given out.

"That's good," Peter agrees. "Otherwise, this is a pretty sketchy walk for a small paycheck."

It really is a sketchy walk, and his senses clamor at odd moments, though nothing really happens save the odd junkie wandering out of the shadows.

Peter's attention is drawn like a magnet, and his body reflexively tenses, but there's no sickly pink sheen to the man's eyes or black-popped veins in his neck from thick needles. Whatever the guy is on, it's not *Aurora.* The relief that follows is both overwhelming and extremely unwelcome. Peter's not sure which feeling is the more fucked up of the two.

“I’ve had worse,” Emma is saying, safely insulated from the violent churn of Peter’s thoughts. She’s finally tucked her keys back into her purse, and the stiff line of her shoulders has completely melted away now that they’re in what Peter assumes is familiar territory. “This is nothing compared to my last job.”

Peter swallows and does his best to leave the junkie in the past. Refocuses to ask, “Which was?”

“Telemarketing.”

“Point taken.” Peter would rather take the Hulk head-on.

“We’re almost there. Just down the road.” Emma points one long acrylic nail towards a looming brick building punctuating the end of the street.

Emma hadn’t been kidding. It really *is* a church, or at least it used to be, obviously converted to the pursuit of more worldly pleasures.

Peter hasn’t been to a church since Gwen, but even he feels a few steps closer to hell just approaching the doorway, oddly guilty under the garish neon sign of a scantily dressed nun praying to the words: ‘Sister Margaret’s Bar for Wayward Children.’

“Welcome to Maggie’s,” Emma says salaciously, grinning when Peter cracks a smile. “Finest entertainment this side of Brooklyn.”

No doubt about that, if Emma is the standard. “No worries. Stay safe, yeah?” It’s almost physically painful to say goodbye, but Peter’s not going to creep on her just because he’s so cripplingly lonely it actually hurts.

But Emma pauses with her hand on the door, and Peter’s heart convulses. “You’re not going to come in?”

“Not really my scene.” A true statement, one that doesn’t have to acknowledge that Peter is capital-B Broke. Hard to get a proper-paying job when he doesn’t legally exist. He’s done a few gigs under the table, but the last few weeks have left Peter sleeping on empty rooftops with an emptier stomach.

He also looks like he hasn't showered in days. The threat of being kicked out for being a walking, talking stain might be too much for Peter to bear right now, especially if he's stepping in with someone like *Emma*- who looks like she's between Vogue shoots.

"Really? I was hoping I could treat you to a drink. It's the least I can do." Scarlett sounds disappointed.

"You don't owe me anything," he protests but doesn't move.

Scarlett puts a hand on her hip. "Fine. Let's consider it a celebratory drink, then."

"For?"

"Ugh," Scarlett rolls her eyes. There's no way she doesn't know how charming that is. "For getting rid of Paul. Making new friends- whatever you want."

Peter's face does something weird. "Friends?"

It's not an outright refusal because Peter is weak for the first real taste of human contact he's had in months, and Emma smirks like she scents blood, "What can I say? I got a good feeling about you."

Peter snorts. Now that's a first.

She pushes the door open, and the soft golden-pink hues of the club illuminate the edges of her smile like a beacon. "C'mon, Tiger. *One drink*. What have you got to lose?"

Peter pretends to think about it. "Nothing."

COME ON, TIGER.
ONE DRINK. WHAT HAVE YOU GOT TO LOSE?

NOTHING.

Wade kicks open the door to his favorite shithole in the entire world. It feels like coming home. Or like a tapeworm infecting its favorite victim. Whatever the simile, Wade is back on familiar ground and breathing easier for it.

It's been a hellish two months in Brazil, and that's saying something, considering Wade's actually been to hell. It turns out that despite being good for the skin, 84% humidity is godawful on his nerves. And the less said about the mosquitos, the better.

Some types of pain just suck.

The bar is still its usual charmingly grimy self, early enough that the dancers haven't started but late enough in the day for it to be acceptably packed. And every single person who recognizes Wade looks gratifyingly disappointed to see him- which he's going to count as a win.

Knowing his reputation doesn't keep them from wishing every time he left was the last time they'd see him. Must be infuriating to know that no matter the shitshow, Wade Wilson will never stop turning up. Hope's one hell of a drug. He should know.

Wade sidles up to the counter and scans the room for Weasel. No dice, but the few patrons that were waiting for a drink suddenly find someplace safer to be, so Wade manspreads to his heart's content.

A minute passes. Still no Weasel. Is he upstairs? Wade briefly considers firing a round or two into the ceiling to get the man's attention but doesn't follow through. Waste of ammo.

He's in a good mood on account of being back, so he gives his friend-not-friend a complimentary seven extra seconds before he's leaning over the bar, intent on helping himself to one of the more bearable bottles of bourbon he knows Weasel's got stashed under the counter.

"Don't mind if I do-"

He's got his hand wrapped around the familiar shape of a Baby Hudson when someone interrupts him. "I would, though."

It's a sexy voice, masculine and deep, scratching the itch just enough

for Wade to pay attention. So he follows the impulse to turn around, tracing the smoky rasp of it back to the source.

Wade doesn't know what he's expecting, but he's still surprised because, sure, the voice is hot, but the guy it belongs to is a fuckin' treat.

He's right behind Wade, staring at him with the kind of face that makes Wade think that somewhere an out-of-touch boyband is missing their fourth member. He's older, probably somewhere in his thirties, with effortlessly messy(™) brown hair that falls over a set of retro dad glasses, magnifying his already big, doe eyes.

His jawline is criminal.

There's no guarantee he's not hallucinating, but Wade lets his eyes wander all the same. The guy is tall and broad, muscles etched with the kind of dedication reserved for Renaissance sculptors or gym rats with too much free time.

He's inked up, too, an ex-con by the looks of it. Wade clocks a smattering of tattoos- the inmate's quincunx on his left-hand ring finger, a match to the three dots beneath his eye, and some pretentious hipster floral peeking out from beneath one rolled-up flannel sleeve- an outdated millennial stereotype all the way down to his very skinny jeans.

And he's talking to Wade without the usual undertone of fear, which is novel for someone in their line of work, so he snaps back to the present.

"You would *what*, baby boy?" Wade purrs, half on instinct, half to test the waters.

Baby Boy doesn't bristle at the nickname, which might as well be blanket permission for Wade to use it forever. "Mind you pilfering the boss' stash," he clarifies, adorably disaffected.

Pilfering? Smart *and* hot? At Sister Margaret's?

He's about to snap back with something suitably witty when– wait… the *boss*?

The answer to Wade's unspoken question makes itself clear when Baby Boy rounds the bar, picking up a towel and starting on a stack of cups like he's auditioning to be on the first page of Google images when someone searches for a stock photo of 'bartender.'

"Who the hell sold *you* to Weasel?" Because someone who looks like *that* and can manage three-syllable words has no job working at a place like Maggie's without the threat of blackmail.

At the very least, he should be up on stage, twerking those fat tits instead of slinging drinks from the wrong side of the bar.

That gets him a close-lipped smile. "Scarlett."

"Say no more," Wade grouses, because what Scarlett wants, Scarlett gets. The woman has Weasel's balls in a fucking bowtie. She already runs half the place, so why not stake a claim on the bar?

But a friend of Scarlett's means that Baby Boy is definitely not in their line of work. Jesus, is Wade talking to a *civilian?*

"Weasel mentioned you," Baby Boy says, confirming Wade's theory. His cool-as-a-cucumber gaze combs over Wade's costume like he's seen it a thousand times, not even pausing when he gets to the swords. He's got some tough-guy bravado act going on. Kind of cute if Wade's in the mood for it. "Deadpool, right?"

He's not talking to Deadpool right now, but he doesn't know what. He'll be better off if he never meets the guy. *Wade* though-

Wade leans forward, batting his eyes behind the mask, chin perched against one gloved hand, "Depends on what you've heard. Anything good?"

"*Good* is a bit of a stretch," Baby Boy replies. His eyes flick to the glass he's cleaning, features filming over as he goes over whatever Weasel's told him and settles on what to pass along. "Says you drink on the house, but he also says to keep you away from the top shelf."

Wade snorts. The fucking audacity. He wonders what else Weasel told the kid and whether it's going to get him a one-way ticket to the bottom of the Hudson River.

“Lucky for Weasel then that I was going for the bottom of the barrel,” he says, reaching down to snag the bottle. He doesn’t need to point out that there isn’t a single thing in Maggie’s that could be mistaken for top shelf.

Except for Wade’s services- which he’d rendered to perfection on that last job. That definitely earns him a tip.

So he uncorks the bourbon, grunting when Baby Boy slides over the glass. He doesn’t look like he’s going to argue, which makes him smarter than most of Wade’s marks.

Wade fills it to the brim, then turns his head away to pull up the mask just high enough to chug it like a shot. Then he does it again, just to prolong the flashfire burn. When he looks back, mask back on, it's to the sight of one thick, scarred eyebrow cocked in surprise. Apparently, downing hard liquor like water merits more of a reaction from Baby Boy than the getup. “Where is the rat bastard, anyway?”

It’s not like Weasel to let someone take over the bar, and Wade is going to be pissed if the fucker just up and retired without telling him. Or worse, died and left Wade without his paycheck. He doesn’t give a shit about the money. It’s the principle of the thing. The job is only done when the funds sit in his account, and Wade hates unfinished business.

Baby Boy jerks his head towards the service door that leads to Weasel’s back office. It has a ‘Do Not Enter’ sign tacked on.

Wade is already getting up, then, on second thought, turns around and grabs the bottle. “Weasel tell you anything about letting me back there?”

Baby Boy isn’t looking at him, pouring up a bevy of shots for a rowdy table just offscreen, “Only not to waste my time trying to stop you.”

“Smart cookie.” If only most of the people Wade dealt with had that level of self-preservation.

Wade takes the bottle and leaves the bar, pushing through the service door and heading down the hallway toward Weasel’s little nest.

The man in question is indeed in his office when Wade kicks open the door, yelping as the merc barges in to flop in one of the greasy armchairs. He barely manages to sweep a stack of files out from under Wade's boots when the merc kicks up his feet onto the ratty table.

"What the fuck, man?!" He's glaring at Wade through his fishbowl glasses, which never has the effect he's going for, looking like a boomer who found out his grandchildren support universal healthcare, clutching the files to his chest like pearls."Don't you know how to fucking *knock?!"*

It's good to be back, and Wade leans into the familiar animosity.

"Sure I do. Kind of my specialty, knocking people off." Wade settles into the banter, sloshing the bourbon very loudly before taking a swig. Weasel doesn't even like double-dipping his fries, so watching Wade drink straight from his bottle earns him another, funnier glare. "This how you greet someone who does you a solid?"

"It's not a solid if you're being paid for it," Weasel snarks, puttering around like an old man, grabbing stacks of paperwork before Wade can kick them to the floor. "You're back earlier than I'd thought. How'd it go?"

Exactly the way it was supposed to, with the world down one human trafficking ring and Wade about to be half a mill richer for it.

It had all the hallmarks of a grisly revenge thriller- a warehouse full of scumbags, a billionaire's daughter, a botched ransom attempt, and even a high-speed chase. Wade's a sucker for a good revenge plot, especially when he's the main character. Charity work is a banger when he's being paid for it.

Wade settles for the abridged version. "Fine." Very abridged version.

Weasel sighs and takes his own advice about not wasting time trying with Wade, "Did you at least-"

"-hang the ringleaders and leave them strung over the compound? Duh." In Wade's opinion, being dramatically murdered by a costumed

nutbag with katanas is usually enough of a message, but some billionaires learn all the ropes from gangster movies. And he can definitely get behind some dramatic flair.

Weasel pauses. “That was Venice.”

Was it?

Which part?

Wade drowns the sense of disorientation with a burning swallow of bourbon.

His head is like a sieve on the best of days, and that’s not even counting the holes he puts there himself. But he’s sure most of the story is accurate because there’s no way in hell Wade let himself be vored by mosquitoes for two months just to hallucinate a sick-ass car chase.

Was it even two months?

“Whatever. It’s done,” Wade interrupts himself, fishing the gold card out of his pouch and flicking it to Weasel. It gets tucked into one of his infinite drawers without further comment.

Knowing when to shut up isn’t just one of Weasel’s few valuable life skills; it’s also the foundation for their friends-not-friendship. The yin to Wade’s yappy yang.

Wade finishes the bottle while Weasel turns to his laptop, working his broker magic to make sure the money lands. The buzz lasts for a blissful two minutes. “So, what’s with the new guy?”

“The new guy? He’s new,” Weasel answers, dismissive. Then jumps when Wade bangs the back of his heel into the desk. Brown eyes flick up, confused, “Why do you care?”

“He works at the bar. Just making sure your little bean is in working order.” Hiring people for the stage is one thing, but in over a decade of grudging acquaintance, Wade’s never seen Weasel agree to anyone at the bar, much less a *civilian.* It’s out of character. Wade has a bullet saved just in case of clone-related shenanigans. “Says you mentioned

me."

Wade doesn't like being talked about when he's not in the frame. Hates it when someone else controls his narrative.

There's a comforting edge of tension in Weasel's tone. "Nothing anyone on the street wouldn't know."

People on the street don't know shit, which is how Wade likes it. He relaxes, which makes Weasel relax. "Says Scarlett bullied you into hiring him."

Not exactly the words Baby Boy used, but it vibes right, so…damn. Maybe not clone-related shenanigans.

"She asked for a favor! What was I supposed to do?" Weasel tries to defend himself, "Say no?"

"Yeah, it's not like you own the place or anything," Wade helpfully agrees, crossing his ankles. "I mean, most people assume Scarlett runs the ship; I just didn't know you were one of them."

Slender fingers fly furiously over the keyboard. "Go to hell, Wilson."

"Been there, done that. What's next? You gonna let him work the back?" If he says yes, Wade's going to need that bullet after all. Better to put Weasel down at his (very middling) prime than watch him go downhill.

"Do I look stupid to you?"

Wade fights his demons not to answer that. Universe-rending feats have been performed on less willpower. But Weasel hasn't confirmed his pay, and Wade is not good with computers. "Not even if Scarlett asks nicely?"

"We both know that the dancers don't ask questions, and neither does he," Weasel says meaningfully, adjusting his glasses. "Trust me, Wade, he just serves drinks and keeps things in check when shit gets rowdy."

The laugh bursts out of Wade's chest, "*Keep things in check*? Weas,

he's a *normie*– the guy you hire to keep someone from making off with a TV at Target, not throw fists in a merc bar with a collective kill count in the triple digits."

"He's a normie who does what he's told and doesn't get scared when he has to serve drinks to a costumed clown packing more firepower than a South Carolina gun club," Weasel snaps. He's got his eyebrow cocked, committed to the grave mistake of trying to figure Wade out. "You're oddly invested. Didn't realize you were such a sucker for big tits and a pretty face."

That's just the side effect of having eyes, which Wade rolls, mimicking the motion with his head so Weasel can tell it's happening. "You're right. Why *would* I be interested in knowing who mans the fucking bar where I take money for *hits?*"

Sister Margaret's likes pretending she's underground, but with the way every dipshit in the place (including Wade, if we're being fair) talks shop, they might as well have a page on Instagram and a booth at the county fair. The only thing keeping law enforcement at bay is the fact that if you go high enough, you'll find that both cops and robbers are cutting their paychecks from the same guy.

The government is truly an inclusive little umbrella. Kumbaya.

It's not like there aren't other places to get work, but Maggie's has grown on Wade. Or maybe Wade's grown on it, like mold. He's got a whole origin story baked into the fucking floorboards, and he'd really rather not go through the entire rigamarole of another prologue elsewhere.

"You won't," Weasel reassures him, rolling his eyes. "I know it's hard to believe, but I actually know a thing or two about running this fucking place. He's *clean*." He stresses the word like he's trying to sell Wade on Clorox or something.

"Clean. With prison tats and a college-level vocabulary." Wade reconsiders the bullet.

Mostly because Weasel is missing the point. Wade doesn't give a shit whether Baby Boy is pure as the driven snow or has a rap sheet

longer than a CVS receipt. He just doesn't like the thought of his business being handled by an amateur.

Weasel sighs the way he always does when Wade uses grown-up adult logic. "Point taken, but you're just going to have to trust me on this." His mouth twists, "Plus, it's too late to break up. The girls love him, and I'm not sure I'll win custody in the divorce."

"Being cucked in your own house? Damn Weas, that's a new low."

"Fuck you." Weasel actually sounds a little upset, which is hilarious, given that Scarlett is too smart to put out for him in the first place. "Money should be in your account by sundown. Now did you need anything else, or did you just come in here to bitch about who I put on my payroll?"

Thick boots land on the floor with a heavy thump. Wade stretches and decides to table the argument, mostly because he'd rather go back and drain the rest of Weasel's stash.

"Whatever. Just let me know when you've got something lined up." A pause as Wade thinks, "And keep it in the city."

"Sure thing, Princess," Weasel says, scowling. "But if we're stuck with you for the foreseeable future, why don't you *actually* do me solid and play nice? I don't want Scarlett on my ass."

"Yeah, you do." Wade makes a face at the image that conjures. Not sure if Weasel can tell. "And this *is* me playing nice."

"And all of America thanks you for your service," Weasel mock salutes, as if Wade is the biggest threat to a civilian in Maggie's. There's a reason most people aren't regulars, and it's *not* because they're moving up in the world.

But Wade has his money and better things to do, so he leaves and heads back to the bar.

The lights are dimmed when he emerges, and the music is low and seductive. There's the usual crowd of mercs sitting near the back and a handful of gullible civilians at the front, pressed up against the stage where one of the girls is twirling on the pole, well into the first

set of a long night.

A totally normal evening at Sister Margaret's, save for the fact that Baby Boy is behind the counter.

It's an odd picture. Not one Wade is sure he likes. He hadn't realized just how much of his mental image of the bar depended on Weasel's presence behind it. Brown eyes slide over Wade when he pops out the back, reaching down for another bottle without asking.

He has a generous glass for Wade by the time the merc takes a seat. It's even got a fancy ice cube, one of those big round ones that make it look like Wade's in a Bond movie instead of a seedy strip club.

Thankfully, it's dark enough in this corner of the bar to hide the scars, but Wade angles his head to the side out of habit. "You're a peach, Baby Boy," Wade murmurs, and nurses this one, just for the hell of it.

"Not my name," Baby Boy finally says, but it doesn't matter.

Wade isn't going to bother remembering the name of a corpse he's going to have to help Weasel drop off the docks. Civilians don't last long at Sister Margaret's.

Wade gives Baby Boy two weeks, tops. Maybe three if he wears something low-cut.

Notes for the Chapter:

> thistleraven has been in the trenches with me for the past few weeks and has blessed this world with her own version of this AU! So if you're looking for more cake, here, take a bite!
>
> All art by me!

2. Chapter 2

Peter wakes up at 4:36 am on a Wednesday and doesn't feel anything.

That's not totally true.

Peter feels a lot of things. There's the rough drag of low-thread count sheets against his skin, the smell of stale rust from the pipes overhead, and the bright slivers of light slanting through the blinds. He hears the slow rumble of his stomach, feels the scratchy itch at the back of his throat, and the greasy hair tickling along his forehead– a thousand myriad sensations crawling across his body.

But those are physical worries, the signs of a body functioning in the most technical sense of the term.

It's Peter's head that's empty– brain so scraped out that he doesn't even have nightmares anymore. It should be a relief not to constantly relive all the old fuckups. All Peter feels is lonely.

Side note, there's got to be a term for how fucked up it is to miss *nightmares*.

Instead, he keeps waking up feeling light in the worst kind of way, hollowed out and untethered, freefalling directly into space.

When Peter had begged Strange for a clean start, he'd meant *everyone else.* He wasn't supposed to be any part of the bargain, only the price. And Strange made the whole thing sound ominous and tragic– like the spell would lance the boil and drain Peter out until the world could be made whole again.

He'd assumed (hoped?) that the magic would…evaporate him? Blink him out of existence? Peter can't say. Magic isn't really a quantifiable science.

But whatever the cost, he'd been willing to pay. It seemed only right to accept the burden for all the lives Peter ruined, either directly or as a result of every bad decision he'd ever made. And he'd made *a lot*

of them.

Terms and conditions signed, Peter resigned himself to death.

Turns out dying would have been the merciful option. But instead of gracefully shuffling off this mortal coil, Peter stumbled directly into *Emma Jean Watson*.

God. *MJ*. Peter feels so *fucking* stupid.

It shouldn't matter that Mary Jane and Emma Jean look and sound and smell nothing alike; he should *have known*. The moment she dropped her name at the bar, Peter should have swung for the hills. But he'd been so starved for a crumb of human affection that Peter followed Emma's smile like a moth straight into the open flame, letting her coax him into accepting one drink, then two, then three—until two hours later, *boom*, he was walking out of Weasel's office completely blindsided with a job and a place to sleep.

Even the sting of charity barely registers. Turns out that weeks of rotating between homeless shelters and cold rooftops on an empty stomach really grinds down the spirit of protest. The only silver lining had been knowing that his loved ones would never have to suffer again.

Well, Peter's been the victim of hubris too many times not to recognize it.

So now he gets to wake up on a queen-sized bed on the second floor of a converted church and suffer the luxuries of having a working heater, running water, and a paycheck– all at the low, *low* cost of watching this world's MJ strip six nights out of seven, and endure men paying for the privilege of groping her.

Fucking Parker luck.

Emma had barely gotten Peter the job before he'd immediately risked it the next evening by almost breaking a regular's arm for touching her naked hipbone. What followed was the most mortifying conversation in human history, with a topless Emma standing between him and Weasel, arguing in his defense while Peter fought

the urge to commit *incredible violence.*

First-day nerves, she'd said. Weasel was not happy about comping the man's tab. He'd already been *so generous* with Peter.

He'll behave; she'd promised the "customer" two free dances. *Won't you, Peter?*

The answer was *fuck yes* because losing this job was no longer an option. Illogical and condescending as it is, the thought of letting random jackasses slobber over Emma is easier to swallow if he's there to keep an eye on her.

Weasel, that motherfucker, saw the opportunity and took it, piling on responsibilities like a kid at a candy store. Peter agreed to his extra terms without question, nodding through a lump of anger so intense he nearly cracked his teeth.

Two weeks in, Peter is still seesawing between seeing Emma as the woman he loves(d) and an uncanny reminder of everything he's given up.

When she's at the club, where Peter can see her and speak to her, Scarlett is her own person.

When Peter is alone, the idea of her is a raw, ugly ache. An open wound salted by the knowledge that she's *here*– all the same pieces of the woman he betrayed but with none of the accusation in her eyes.

It helps that the two wholes of her are nothing alike. The first time he'd met her, Mary Jane smelled like fresh rain and leather. She was a shy, introverted secretary who spoke in low tones and didn't like crowds. She had dark skin and deep black eyes, with fire-engine hair straight from the bottle. Towards the end, she was almost nothing but bone, gaunt, and pink-eyed, smelling like the rot of Peter's venom and fruit left out for too long under the sun.

Emma Jean is a walking firecracker with a booming voice and an equally large personality. She takes up the room when she enters, arresting everyone's attention without quarter. Emma is also, in her own words, an unapologetic *bitch*, grabbing life by the throat and

choking it till it hacks up her due. She smells like spice, a deep burn in the back of his throat, and it's enough of a difference for Peter to keep his distance.

And true to his word, two weeks in, Peter has *behaved.*

Weasel takes advantage of Emma's leash, working Peter like a dog and expecting him to be happy with scraps. Technically, it's indentured servitude. Ironically, it's more stability than he's ever had.

If this is all buildup to some cosmic joke, Peter is worried he's not going to survive the punchline.

The combination of decent sleep, food, and Emma's unburdened friendship has done a number on Peter's emotional state. Namely, the numbness that's been his constant companion is finally thawing away, leaving room for the slowly horrifying realization that instead of being excised from his universe, he's been *transmitted*– a dormant sickness simmering under another victim's skin.

He's already risked Emma's job almost as soon as she met him. What's next? How long till Peter ignites a chain reaction that starts with a stupid mistake and ends in *ruined lives*-

The panic attack comes over him in waves.

It's been a while, but like everyone who's ever shared a cell in a heavily crowded prison, Peter knows how to suffer in silence. He lets the riptide wash him out to sea, gritting his teeth through the nausea and riding the sine curve of hot and cold for what seems like forever.

Eventually —unfortunately—Peter comes back to himself. He's shivering, and the sheets are drenched and twisted. Everything feels grimy as hell, and his mouth is drier than dust. Taking on the day feels like an Avenger's level threat, but Peter powers through the exhaustion and forces himself to the bathroom on shaky legs.

At least the daily pipeline of showering, shaving, and getting dressed gives him something to focus on.

He strips with clinical efficiency and forgoes the hot water, flinching under a freezing spray and lathering himself with the most non-

offensive 3-in-1 body wash he could find that won't give him a migraine.

When he's done, Peter towels his hair and dresses on autopilot. Anyone looking in would be fooled into thinking he's a normal, functioning member of society.

Peter's therapist, if he exists, would be very proud.

He steps out the door and heads down the staircase that separates the bar from his 'apartment.' There's still half an hour before opening, so Peter settles into the routine of pulling out the chairs and wiping down the counter -plus all the extra amendments Weasel added to the constitution- before he unlocks the doors.

People start trickling in almost immediately, which would have been strange if Peter hadn't realized barely two hours into his very first shift that he was serving drinks at some sort of…mercenary bar.

He's been accused of being slow on the uptake before, but it doesn't take a genius detective to deduce that most of Maggie's regulars aren't the usual strip-bar fare.

For one, it's packed during work hours. Day drinking is not a novel concept, but there's nothing special about the menu that can't be found at any other watering hole. In fact, three different bars in the area serve cheaper alcohol if you're looking to get wasted at 7:02 am on a Wednesday.

Secondly, they don't pay attention to the girls. It is *weird* for regulars of a *strip bar* to know each other's names but draw blanks on most of the dancers.

Thirdly, they talk. If loose lips sink ships, then Sister Margaret's should be rotting at the bottom of the Mariana Trench six times over. No need for enhanced hearing when tables of openly armed men are trying to out-drink each other while recounting the details of their gigs with increasingly loud and absurd detail.

They're so…*messy*. The inmates back at Ryker's had more discretion than most of New York's toughest mercs. The second-hand cringe is

almost unbearable.

It seems the glamorous underground world of Jane Wick is doomed to fantasy.

And, finally, there's Weasel. Jackass looks like a wet yorkie, but he's obviously the brains of the operation. Peter's already been victim to his shrewd intelligence once, and lesson fucking *learned.* Don't judge a book by its cover. After all, no one makes it far in the business of cutting throats without being cutthroat themselves.

There's no altruism in Weasel letting the dancers set their own rules and skimp on stage fees. Flesh is just a front, or maybe the icing on the cake. The *real* bottom line is calculated under the table– between the handshakes and visits to the office, where people go in and come out looking like they've got a job to do.

Lucrative jobs if the numbers he's overheard are true. Meaning the mercs have *no* excuse to be as stingy as they are. Two-Stone Ricky running ten stacks for stealing a Botero could stand to tip Hyacinth a little better, in Peter's opinion.

But Peter wasn't hired to have an opinion. His job is to pour drinks and stop fights from breaking out. And try not to cause suspicious levels of damage to people who think *Peter* is on the menu.

A few twisted arms, and they've learned their lesson. Mostly.

Some of them still act like hot shit, strutting around the bar with their gun bulges front and center, acting like they own the place, and looming over Peter, escalating when he refuses to be cowed. They don't know that Peter is immune to most forms of intimidation after spending a lifetime around maniacs.

Otherwise, the decision to spend his evenings pouring drinks for people who taste like fresh blood and gunpowder would warrant some serious self-reflection. As it stands, most of them don't even get a second glance, much less any actual consideration.

Unless they're harassing the girls.

Then, two weeks and four days in, the entrance to Sister Margaret's

bursts open, and everyone's eyes are immediately drawn to the silhouette at the door, a figure burnished in wide swathes of red and black.

The world pinches and slows to a crawl– time dilating the way it always does when Peter senses a threat. He doesn't need three guesses.

Deadpool.

The man is huge, his presence *enormous,* body as broad as a battleship, and armed about the same. Everything about him is as loud as a siren, and the volume of his costume is matched only by the sheer alarm ringing in Peter's ears.

That's a man who would gut me without hesitation, Peter thinks when he sidles up to the bar, and the delicious tension that settles at the back of his skull is the first *real* feeling he's had in ages.

He wonders if Deadpool existed in his old world. If he did, they never crossed paths. A shame.

"Hey, Baby Boy." Deadpool rumbles, and the air around him tastes like ozone and gunsmoke, sliced with the coppery overtones of fresh blood. Underneath it all, there's the lingering aftertaste of something rotten and sweet– an endlessly burning spool of cotton candy.

It's the smell of danger. *Violence.*

The rumors floating around the bar about the man are outlandish– the kind of broken bullshit two eight years olds would come up with when trying to one-up each other in a fantasy fight.

Peter knows the power of a reputation. He's used Spider-Man's rep to his advantage for years. But no one is stupid enough to believe Spider-Man can take an RPG to the face and just walk it off.

No one can.

Except for Deadpool, apparently. That's the song Peter's been hearing on repeat: that no one can take twelve stabs to the head, no one can be torn in half, no one can take a fall off the Empire State Building,

and so on…*except* Deadpool.

The list of things Deadpool can apparently walk off is *endless.* The mercs say that Deadpool can go down but doesn't stay down, *can't stay down-*

Peter's mouth is suddenly slick with venom, and he has to turn around to cover whatever expression his face is making and swallow.

Fuck.

He hasn't reacted this strongly to anything in *months.* Every muscle in his body is coiling up, long dormant instincts shaking off the dust, ready to spring into action at the slightest provocation.

His teeth ache. He needs to *bite-*

"Deadpool," Peter clamps his jaw like a steel trap, turning when he's finally collected himself. His throat tingles. It feels like he's stuck his head directly under the belfry. The man's been a semi-permanent fixture in the club for weeks, long enough for Peter to get a handle on himself. All that talk is exactly that, *talk.* "The usual?"

Meaning whatever Weasel's got under the table.

"You know it," Deadpool confirms, making grabby hands at the bottle of Knot Creek. He always chooses the darkest spot at the edge of the bar, where two of the overhead lights don't work. Weasel doesn't want them replaced.

He tilts his head away and inhales a quarter of the bottle like it's nothing. Deadpool must have some sort of mutation, because the bitter air of alcohol evaporates in the span of a few heartbeat.

Unfortunately, asking questions isn't part of the job description. Peter tucks away his curiosity and is about to hand him a glass- "There you are, jackass." -when *pop* goes the Weasel, emerging from behind Peter like some sort of blonde, greasy shadow.

Peter barely hides a flinch because what the *fuck?*

Weasel glides over, taking center stage with Deadpool and grabbing

the glass out of Peter's hand.

"Shoo," he says, waving Peter off. "Go alphabetize the bottles or something."

Peter sidesteps the sudden burst of irritation. He's trying to stay on Weasel's good side for Emma's sake, so he retreats to the other end of the bar and starts working on the inevitable sixth round of drinks for the table in the back.

They've been pounding shots ever since they sat down, getting increasingly louder by the hour. The constant noise is scattering Peter's attention, grating on his nerves.

He tunes out the heated game of one-upmanship and focuses on the conversation happening at the other end of the bar.

"You got something for me?" Deadpool is asking, low enough that most people shouldn't be able to hear.

"Nothing big," Weasel responds, snatching the bottle from Deadpool's hand to pour himself a glass before the merc can drain it. "Unless you've reconsidered Japan?"

There's a disgruntled noise from beneath the mask. "Nah. Jet lag's a fucking bummer." He pauses, "Thought you said you had ears on something in the city."

"Too small. Not up your alley."

"You an expert in what *goes up my alley?*" Deadpool's leer is audible. "Figured out the details of my size kink? Gross, Weas."

"Wouldn't be much of an information broker if I didn't." Weasel snorts, letting Deadpool wrangle the bottle back. "But trust me when I say that everything I learn about you is against my will."

Deadpool reaches out and tweaks Weasel's nose none too gently. "What can I say? I'm a girl of hidden depths, a gift that keeps on giving."

"Mhmm. A real walking, talking STD." Weasel rubs at his face,

sounding like he wishes this conversation were over.

From the side, they look like friends– or something at the fringes of it. But for all the seemingly harmless banter, there's no mistaking the sharp, underlying edge to all their jokes. There's no ease in their interaction, none of the warmth Peter and Flint had before everything went south.

But they don't press to hurt. They keep it civil because, underneath the cloying stench of Weasel's strawberry shortcake vape and nicotine cologne, he smells like fear. It's a smell Peter's only recently gotten acquainted with, one that only makes an appearance when Deadpool does.

And Weasel isn't alone.

Most of the regulars won't even talk to the guy. Mercs that would take a bullet train head-on give Deadpool a wide berth– like animals instinctively fleeing at the signs of a natural disaster.

From what Peter's heard, Deadpool's attention is like his line of fire; a killzone.

In another life, Peter would have leaped at the challenge. Now, he smothers the impulse.

Attention can be lethal, and Peter barely survived the spotlight the first time. He's not eager to repeat the experience. A low profile is the rational thing to do, no matter how much his gut is *screaming* at him to make a move, just to see how it'll play out.

Peter ignores his gut. His gut is *not* his friend. His gut gave Flint Marko, *a career criminal,* three full vials of his venom.

"I'm getting *bored*, Weas." Deadpool's frustration bleeds into the ambient air around him, though his voice stays deceptively light. "You don't want that."

The noisy mercs in the back kick it up a notch, scattering Peter's attention for a split second. He grinds his teeth, gums aching, *annoyed.*

“Wade, as much as I’d love to get your stink out of my floorboards, I can’t just magic shit up.” Weasel’s frustration is a lot louder, reflected in his voice and posture as he curls over the bar. “So until I’ve got something big to chase-”

Like Spider-Man, Peter thinks, and he knows it’s a bad fucking idea the moment it pops into his head. But it takes hold like a disease, infecting his mind with old-world memories of swinging through the city, how the world boiled down to the narrow gaps between roofs and claustrophobic fights-

“-looking for a big payday, then buy the goddamn ticket to Japan!” Weasel finishes whisper-shouting his tirade.

Oh.

The disappointment feels like being dunked in cold water.

Money. Of course.

Deadpool is a mercenary. Peter shouldn’t be projecting his stupid instincts onto others just because someone triggered his fight response. People aren’t *like* Peter; they’re not tossing and turning at night, hungry for the pulse of adrenaline and itching for the thrill of the chase.

It’s probably for the best. As fun as the idea of fighting Deadpool might be, the actual matchup would probably leave Peter disappointed. The guy might be a heavyweight in mercenary circles, but Spider-Man is in a different league altogether.

And the less attention Peter draws to himself, the better, even if he’s practically *itching* for an outlet-

His senses go off like a flare, and Peter doesn’t even think, just tilts his head a few centimeters to the right, catching the stray bottle that’s spinning in slow motion over his shoulder before it can shatter against the back of his head.

He turns and rolls it over his wrist, spinning the bottle on his palm in a smooth 360-degree motion before setting it down on the counter with a definitive *clink*.

When he looks up, the mercs in the back have firmly crossed the line from *rowdy* to *destructive.*

About fucking time.

Wade watches Baby Boy snatch a bottle that comes flying at him out of the air without looking.

Damn, they threw the thing at mach speed, too. Wade's got to hand it to the kid; those are some impressive reflexes. He follows the easy catch by spinning the glass with enough flair to make a schoolgirl swoon, setting it against the bartop like he's the main character.

The jackasses in the back don't even notice, hauling each other over the tables in a messy, drunken sprawl. Wade hasn't seen this much fumbling since prom night.

They're embarrassing to the profession. He should do the world a favor (and indulge himself) by shooting them in the chimichangas for interrupting plans between Wade and his future paycheck, but the look of intense concentration on Baby Boy's face distracts him. That is the furrowed brow of a man who is about to fuck around and find out.

Boo. Three more days and Baby Boy would have passed the cutoff mark.

"And he was *this* close to being the final girl," Wade mourns performatively, sparing a glance at Weasel to gauge how the man is feeling about the prospect of watching his civilian pet project get snapped in half. But the asshole just looks vaguely amused, which piques Wade's interest.

So he turns back around just in time to watch Baby Boy march right into fucking around territory. He straight up walks toward the group of heavily armed mercs, no weapons, no foreplay, no nothing– just *moxie.*

Damn. He's stupid. Wade likes that in a guy.

Usually, Wade likes hedging his bets on the underdog for the thrill, but four against one is bad odds for anyone who isn't Deadpool, even a civvie with so many badass tattoos.

"Hey," Baby Boy says, wrapping a hand around the leg of one wooden chair as the one with a bad haircut raises it over his head.

Four extremely drunk mercs manage to scrape enough brain cells to pay attention to the sudden newcomer.

"You know the rules. Sit down, or take it outside," Baby Boy continues, tugging on the chair like he's trying to take it from an unruly toddler.

There's a collective laugh as all four bozos simultaneously forget their beef to unionize against a new, soft, and squishy target.

"Oh yeah?" The short one smiles, revealing a row of really ugly teeth. Wade's fist immediately itches to plant itself into that mouth, just for offending his eyes like that. "Who's going to make us, *you?*"

"If I have to," he shrugs, and Wade sees the taunt in the little curve of his mouth.

Bold move, Cotton.

The rest of the bar, normally oblivious to a few broken pieces of furniture and some blood, takes notice of the audacity. Wade can practically hear eyeballs turning and the collective bating of breath.

"That's cute. He thinks he can *take us*." Bad Haircut snickers, drunkenly swaying into the conversation. He gives Baby Boy a once-over, expression turning lewd, "Then again, maybe he can…in one of the back rooms."

"He *does* have bigger tits than most of the girls here," his unfortunate-looking friend leers, staring at Baby Boy's admittedly mouth-watering chest. Motherfucker is tall and top-heavy, built like a linebacker, invading the kid's space like he's looking for a *touch*-down if you get Wade's drift. "Got a pretty face, too. What do you say, sweetheart? Why don't we go to the back and we can apologize to you *real good.*"

Baby Boy's hand constricts halfway into a fist before he forces it to relax. He looks like he's barely holding himself back, and coin flip on whether this is going to be very funny or very sad. Either way, Wade's on board to be entertained.

"Yo, Weasel," Ugly Smile calls out, eyes locked on Baby Boy, lurid and alcohol-glazed, "You mind if we take your bar bitch for a spin?"

His grin promises an unpleasant time, but Wade isn't worried. Maggie's is a shithole for sure, with morals looser than Wade's jaw, but some things are still too far. Not that it keeps these loser shitheads from defaulting to it when they need to compensate.

"You break it, you buy it," Weasel replies gamely. Which, dang, *cold*. Sometimes, Wade needs a reminder as to why he kind of likes the guy.

Baby Boy's mouth twitches into a smile, eager, and Deadpool's entire body goes on alert. "Take the chair out of my rent, then."

Ready, set, *action*. An invisible hand slams the clapboard, and everyone bursts into motion.

The chair in question swings and misses. Baby Boy fluidly sidesteps both Bad Haircut and his buddy, grabbing the support and using the momentum to hook the wooden back over Linebacker's neck, flipping the chair and twisting both mercs like ballerinas before sending them crashing to the floor.

Bad Haircut is scrambling up, but Linebacker is pinned to the floor by his chair necklace, anchored by Baby Boy's leg as he presses down hard enough to snap the wood and drive the remaining air out of his lungs.

The bigger they are, the dumber they fall. Linebacker is immediately out for the count, but a broken chair is still useful, and Baby Boy is apparently the creative sort.

The snapped leg turns into a baton, and Baby Boy leisurely sways out of pistol-whipping range when Bad Haircut pulls out his gun, dancing back in to drive the splintered wood under the merc's armpit on the

outswing.

Screaming in pain, Bad Haircut stumbles back only for Baby Boy to grab his wrist and haul him forward, twisting his arm in a *very fancy* maneuver that ends up with the gun on the floor and kicked safely out of reach.

Interesting.

Then it's a *pas de deux*, with Baby Boy's back against Haircut's chest, using the impaled baton as leverage to toss the man over his shoulder and straight into Ugly Smile.

The merc falls out of the way, only to run into Baby Boy's fist as it buries deep in his guts. Even at a distance, Wade can hear his ribs break. Doubled over, Ugly Smile is coughing up blood and vomit when a tattooed hand cradles the back of his head and slams his mouth into the table once, twice, three times. Then it's lights out.

It's over almost as soon as it began, and as the dust settles, Wade thinks Baby Boy might just be *final girl* material after all.

He'd expected it to be fast. He'd expected it to be messy because drunk mercs aren't exactly a masterclass in finesse (Wade is unique that way). What he hadn't been expecting was Baby Boy to come out on top, let alone to have so effortlessly shut them down that it barely merits the paragraph.

And the kid isn't done. He's pinned the fourth guy in place with nothing but a glare, jaw flexing like an attack dog straining against its leash. The dumbass curdles under the pressure, looking like he's turned over a new leaf as a law-abiding citizen in the few heartbeats it took Baby Boy to obliterate his buddies.

When it's clear the fight is over, Baby Boy leans back, completely relaxed, eyes flat, no sense of triumph in the aftermath, just… *disappointment*– like he'd been craving something more and been left wanting.

Wade can't resist a low, appreciative whistle, clocking the way Baby Boy's entire body reacts to the sound. His head snaps in Wade's

direction, and the whole room vignettes as he stares Wade down, eyes flashing like he wants to crumble Wade's spine like a cookie.

Lust stabs Wade's gut all the way to the hilt. All the tension in the room funnels right into his dick.

"Changed my mind, Weas," Wade breathes, "You should keep him."

Unfortunately, the romance dissipates when Baby Boy breaks eye contact. He busies himself with cleanup, dragging three unconscious mercs toward the exit without comment. The fourth follows like a whipped dog, probably rethinking his line of work.

He turns back to Weasel and watches the man's eyebrow slowly crank up in the world's smuggest expression of, *I told you so.* Wade replaces the urge to punch Weasel's grin off by settling for destroying his dignity by flicking a peanut at full velocity.

"I *am* keeping him," Weasel winces as the peanut nails him under the eye. His head tilts ever so slightly upward. "Very close."

Wade thinks back to the comment about *rent,* and does a double-take when the dots connect. "You got him living *over the bar?"* Wade wheezes, incredulous. "Weas…"

If Weasel is hitting that, Wade is going to empty a whole mag into his greasy blond head. Then he's following suit because there's unfair, and then there's *unfair.*

"No!" Weasel has no idea the disgusted face he's pulling narrowly saved his ass. "Don't be fucking gross. It's free labor. Him living upstairs means I can go home early." He waves the subject away, "So, Tokyo?"

Wade frowns. Honestly, he'd been thinking about it, but it's suddenly very important that he stays in New York. No reason. "What's that job you were talking about? The one you said couldn't gape my alley?"

Weasel manages to gag and sigh at the same time, "$12k."

Eww. Weasel was right. Double Eww. Wade doesn't usually bend

over for anything less than 50k, and this is closer to pocket lint than an actual paycheck. His knee-jerk reaction is decline…but fuck it, he's *bored*. "And the mark?"

"She's just your type. A regular ambitious scum of the earth, in the middle of an arms deal with Kingpin to secure her position after she offed her boss. Trade is set to happen soon."

Hmm. Kingpin is a messy bitch. Whether you're dealing with him or *with him*, there's nearly always something that goes sideways, and not in a sexy way. The whole job screams cheap and sloppy, and Wade isn't that type of girl anymore.

He's got standards. Then Baby Boy comes back in, and maybe Wade's feeling a little cheap after all. Sloppy if the stars align, which they never do.

"Sign me up," Wade says, and Weasel, who knows him as well as anyone on this planet dares, doesn't need to look to understand.

He just rolls his big, fat eyes through his big, fat glasses. "*Typical.*"

Another peanut gets cocked and loaded. "Careful, Weas; you aren't accusing me of getting predictable, are you?"

"As if I'd ever accuse you of making my life easier." Weasel is already pushing up off the bar. He's smart enough not to point an actual finger in Wade's direction, but he's got the balls to glare. "Just remember, you break it, *you buy it.*"

By the time Baby Boy is back behind the counter, Weasel has disappeared through the back. They're alone, nothing but a piece of wood (ha) between Wade and his target. And the dumbfucks in the bar know better than to interrupt Deadpool when he's talking (to someone).

Behind the bar, Baby Boy hardly looks the worse for wear. He's wringing dirty pink water out of the mop he'd used to wipe the floor, cool as a cucumber. Brown eyes flick up to Wade. "Need something?"

"That was a hell of a show," Wade starts, because compliments are supposed to be conversational lube or something. "Really earned

your tough guy tattoos, kid."

Baby Boy rolls his eyes, "Whatever keeps them on their best behavior when the dancers start."

There's too much of a protective edge in his growl to just be the job talking. White Knights are so early aughts. That reminds Wade…

"Oh yeah." Wade snaps his fingers. "You're Scarlett's friend, right?"

Baby Boy flinches like Wade pressed on a bruise. And with the way he locks up, they might be more than friends. Rare breed– not a lot of men can handle watching their girl strip for other guys.

"She just did me a favor, s'all." Shrugging, he hides away towards the sink, washing the more stubborn blood spatter off his knuckles. Too late to deflect, though. Wade feels like he's in one of those video games where an enemy opens up his underbelly to reveal a critical weakness. "And it's *kid,* now?"

"Not like you ever gave me your name."

"Not like you ever asked."

Wade doesn't argue the point. It's too early in their relationship to start gaslighting. "What can I say? Watching you fold four goons like they were cheap laundry makes you interesting."

Baby Boy dries his hands on the dishrag, flings it over his shoulder. He turns back to Wade with a thick brow cocked behind his glasses- the one with a scar running through it. It makes him look cool. Other people get all the luck. "That's a low bar."

"Practically a tripping hazard in Hellhouse," Wade agrees.

"Who's the devil in this scenario?" Baby Boy asks, running his eyes pointedly over Wade's costume. "Because I feel a little underdressed for the role."

Not underdressed *enough,* in Wade's opinion. He rakes his voice over gravel, "You asking to limbo with me, kid?"

This is usually the part where they backpedal.

Baby Boy surprises him by leaning forward, crossing his arms over the counter in a way that makes his collarbones pop out. Wade lets his eyes rove over the elegant lines of those fragile bones down to his bulging pecs. “Depends. Will I get to see you bend over backward?”

His eyes are lidded, *hot.* An unfamiliar sensation unfurls in Wade’s gut, like a live spark. It takes a few seconds to recognize what’s happening. Baby Boy is *flirting.* With *Wade.* Is this real life?

Doesn’t matter. Wade would have to retire his mercenary card if he didn’t take the shot. “That can be arranged,” he purrs, “If you tell me your name.”

Baby Boy’s brows rise high. Now that Wade’s really paying attention, it’s crazy how expressive they are. A guy could get motion sick. “Are you actually going to use it if I do?”

“Maybe,” Wade lies. Mostly. “Depends if I like it.”

Snorting, Baby Boy shakes his head a little. He pulls back and starts on a stack of glasses that have the kind of stains the Vatican couldn’t cleanse. “Don’t know if I can handle that kind of pressure.”

“You looked like you handled yourself just fine,” Wade murmurs, twirling the empty bottle of whiskey to occupy his hands. “Unless you’re sayin’ it was a fluke.”

“They were drunk,” he says, but not like an excuse. It sounds bitten off, a simmering frustration he wasn’t able to vent. “Not like they could put up a *real* fight.”

A rough chuckle rolls through Wade. A *real* fight. He doesn’t miss the way Baby Boy looks at him when he says it, which strokes his ego as much as it does the heat between his legs.

Wade perches his chin against his palm, leaning forward until he’s nearly fully over the counter. “You think you can take *me*?”

Baby Boy’s jaw flexes, swallowing in a way that draws Wade’s eyes like a magnet. The silence is fucking *arrogant.*

Wade's stomach clenches with a molten curl of arousal and aggression. His hands are practically itching to wrap around the girls and impress on Baby Boy just *how* out of his league Deadpool is.

He tucks the urge away. Been a while since anyone's had the balls to play ball with him. Wade's enjoying it too much to let reality intrude.

"Who knows, maybe you can," Wade purrs instead, indulging the fantasy. It plays out in pornographic detail, with horny flashes of meaty arms wrapped around his neck, squeezing the air out of Wade's lungs before a final press snaps the bone like it's a toothpick. Fuck, that's hot.

"Just *maybe*?" Baby Boy goads.

But then he'd come back, and it would be game over for Baby Boy. As gorgeous as he'd look, trembling with fear and dripping big, fat tears out of his Disney eyes, Weasel would be a *colossal bitch* about having to deal with another victim of Wade's impulses on Hellhouse property.

"Depends on whether you've got any more fancy SHIELD moves tucked away," Wade smirks, watching Baby Boy freeze like a deer caught in headlights. "Haven't seen someone use a takedown like that in a hot minute."

In the split-second pause, Baby Boy's face scrubs clean. His eyes go somewhere far away. Then he's rubber-banding back to reality, playful tension evaporating all at once.

"What can I say? Prison is a diverse ecosystem."

The mixed signals throw Wade uncharacteristically off-kilter. Baby Boy isn't a brick wall, but it's surprisingly hard to get a read on the little ounces of truth nestled in the pound of lies.

"Where'd you serve?" Wade taps under his eye, a mirror to the three dots on Baby Boy's cheekbone. The answer is going to be pure bullshit, but Wade's in the mood to be entertained.

"Rykers. Six years." Baby Boy shuffles, shoulders hunching just a little. He's stacking cups with single-minded focus. "Manslaughter."

That squeezes an honest-to-goodness giggle out of Wade. And credit where credit is due because Baby Boy delivers that lie completely straight. Wade can appreciate a man who commits to the bit. That shameful side glance is fucking Oscar-worthy.

“Thought you had to do a little more than *manslaughter* to get into Rykers,” Wade chuckles, endlessly entertained at the thought. “Stop me if you’ve heard this one. So a super-villain walks into a strip bar and-”

“Disappears.” Another close-lipped smile curls across Baby Boy’s face, just bitter enough to be the truth.

That Wade can believe, but the slow trickle of information is fraying his patience. Subtlety is not his strong suit; the suit is very unsubtle, actually.

If this were a regular gig, Baby Boy would be tied up in some warehouse and deepthroating one of Wade’s knives, begging to trade his secrets in exchange for his life. It’s tempting. There’s a thin blade tucked into a sheath at his wrist. He could have it out and trained on the kid’s throat faster than he could blink. Sure, the kid can throw down, but Deadpool runs a whole different ball game.

Baby Boy doesn’t seem to realize that, openly taunting Deadpool with that hot-and-heavy stare.

Just before the impulses get too loud to ignore, Weasel is back, and his presence is the world’s most potent cock-block. He motions Wade towards the office, glaring at the back of Baby Boy’s head.

Wade pushes off the stool, winks, relaxes his grip on the knife holstered to his thigh, “Been fun chatting with you, kitten, but duty calls.”

Baby Boy looks like he ate a pound of lemons.

“Do *not* call me kitten.”

The commanding undertone is sexy. “Yes, *Daddy*.”

“Let’s cut a deal,” Baby Boy interrupts. “I’ll tell you my name if you

never call me *Daddy* again."

Wade grins and holds out his hand.

Baby Boy stares at the blood-red glove before reaching out with a resigned stare. His grip is firm, and the veins in his forearm pop out in vivid colors against the pale skin, disappearing into a forest of tattoos. Wade wants to follow them with his tongue.

"It's Peter. Peter Parker."

Wade's mouth twists under the mask. "I don't like it."

Good thing he had his fingers crossed behind his back.

Baby Boy sighs. "I figured."

———————

Call it a woman's intuition, but Wade's got a sense about these things- wouldn't be cut out for the mercenary life if he didn't. Impressive tits aside, there's just *something* about this new bartender. The mystery is going to keep Wade up at night, and that's bad news for everyone.

Once Weasel is done letting Wade snooze through the details of the job, he excuses himself through the office and makes his way upstairs.

He takes the stairwell two steps at a time until he reaches the little hallway that leads to Weasel's attic apartment. Motherfucker won't let *Wade* crash here but gives it up on the first date to some hot guy with nerdy glasses and slutty eyebrows-

…Yeah. Ok.

But Baby Boy is definitely hiding something, and Wade is going to figure out *what.*

His first thought is SHIELD. Issue is, shoe doesn't fit. Wade can usually clock SHIELD agents a mile away. It's unnerving, but moves aside, Baby Boy doesn't ring any of his well-honed alarms.

For two, he doesn't look like a typical plant. Everything about him is messy, from his cover story to his tells.

"*Six years at Ryker's*," Wade's scar-pocked *ass.*

The kid is either extremely well-trained or not trained at all. It's Wade's first time being unable to tell the difference. Everything coming out of his mouth *sounds* true, but it's so patently ridiculous that the cognitive dissonance of listening to it makes Wade's brain itch.

An ex-con '*from Ryker's lol*' sporting small-time tats, who fluidly uses high-level SHIELD combat maneuvers —all while looking like the kind of wet-dream, thirst trap that gets edited to bad phonk on Tiktok — serving drinks at Sister Margaret's like he's got no other options?

And he's flirting with Wade?

Yeah. Tastes like a scam. And that's coming from a guy who firmly buys into Time Cube.

The other scenario is that Baby Boy really *is* a supervillain, and Weasel has lost his fucking mind. Wade really wants to give his old butt buddy the benefit of the doubt because there's only room for one lunatic in their two-man routine.

Sometimes, an act of self-defense starts with breaking into someone's apartment.

Hey, if the kid were less overt or had the good sense to get his ass beat when confronting four mercs, Wade wouldn't be here.

Stealth isn't his preferred way to go about things; again– check the suit, but some things require a delicate touch. Jimmying the lock is disturbingly easy, and Wade turns the knob very slowly, feeling out for any suspicious tension in the spring.

Nothing.

He lets go of the door and pushes it open in a leisurely swing. Still nothing. Not that a shotgun would be any real obstacle for Wade, but he's trying to lay low here.

Confident he's not going to be spattered, Wade creeps in, making a cursory, sweeping glance. Beyond the familiar sight of lancet windows and vaulted ceilings, the 'apartment' still looks as weird as ever, the layout an unholy cross (hah!) between a studio loft and a shitty player-built SIMS 3 house.

When casing a joint, it's vital to cover areas of high interest. So Wade beelines to the sad kitchenette and immediately opens the fridge.

Oof.

There's nothing but a few bottles of water, takeout from the noodle place down the block, and a half-unwrapped bar of dark chocolate. It's 70% cocoa, which means that Baby Boy likes chocolate, but also feels like he needs to suffer for the sin of having a sweet tooth.

Wade scribbles '*extreme guilt complex*' on a mental post-it note and sticks it to Baby Boy's file.

The living room barely qualifies for the title, looking about as lived in as a morgue. Slivers of light from the open window highlight a faded leather couch, threadbare and clinging on to dear life by the grace of god and duct tape, as well as a battered coffee table that has too many suspicious stains to sell on Craigslist.

No TV. Just a bare brick wall.

Bathroom is the same deal. There's a toothbrush, razor, a mildly wet towel, and the world's saddest body wash tucked against the wall of Weasel's grimy shower.

'*Smells cheap*' addendum to the mental post-it.

The bedroom is the only room that looks like it's being used on a regular basis. The sheets are made, and the sad little pillows are all propped up. There's nothing on the bedside table other than a Starkphone charger, one for an older model before they switched over to USB-C.

Scrounging through the closet doesn't provide Wade with any insights beyond the fact that Baby Boy is a solid decade out of fashion. Judging based on looks feels like throwing stones from a

very glass house, but it's hard to consolidate the lean, compact way Baby Boy moves with the billowy button-downs and secondhand hipster t-shirts.

Most of the clothes look like they were sourced from Goodwill, with faded references and stale memes. And is it him? Is Wade not 'with it' anymore? No. It's the kids that must be wrong because there's nothing funny about the ratty misprinted Peanut's shirt reading SPOONY.

'*9gag humor.'* Doesn't bode well for their romantic future.

Wade checks the floorboards, he checks the wall, he checks the damn lighting fixture in the bathroom because they did it in Burn Notice.

Bupkiss. Nada. ничего.

Standing back in the living room, Wade is fucking annoyed. Baby Boy's mental file so far has three notes, and none of them help bridge the gap between the kid at the bar and the one Weasel's got living in his attic.

The difference between finding nothing incriminating and finding *nothing at all* is making Wade real fucking twitchy. Either Baby Boy is the world's most consummate professional, or he's a soulless robot because the entire apartment practically *screams* uncanny valley. Is this bitch really out here, living like this, just raw-dogging reality?

There isn't a single thing in the apartment beyond the bare essentials required to survive. And Baby Boy's got a distressingly low fucking bar. Not a book, not a laptop, not even a single magazine– he's been living here for three weeks; what the fuck does he *do*?

Then he spots it. A backpack nestled between the radiator and the wall. Jackpot! Now, why would Baby Boy try to hide something like that out of sight?

He's reaching for it when, suddenly, it feels like he's been made. The feeling skitters over his entire body, the sensation of being watched crawling over his nerves like a thousand spiders.

His Beretta is out in an instant, thumb on the safety and pointed

faster than his mind can catch up. Deadpool's finger is on the trigger, except he doesn't know what he's aiming at. The place is empty– the front door firmly latched, nothing but dead air and dust between Wade's gun and the rest of the apartment.

Stepping back, Deadpool presses his back to the brick wall, letting the pressure on his spine ground his freefalling pulse. He sweeps the room with the muzzle, trying to pinpoint where the feeling is coming from. Nothing. No one.

Deadpool grits his jaw hard enough to crack the bone. What the fuck is going on? Did something trigger him? Is he having a fucking *episode*?

No. It's not the same. The feeling is heavy and *intense*, bearing down on Deadpool like an anchor instead of the muddy fishbowl sensation that comes with a panic attack. This is his gut saying something is wrong, but *what?*

Whatever it is, he can't get a bead, but the thrum of adrenaline rushing through his body is so overwhelming that Deadpool feels lightheaded. He's got to get the fuck out before he starts shooting at the walls. Anyone coming to investigate the noise is going to die, and Wade likes to keep his indiscriminate killing to a minimum, especially at Maggie's.

Going back down is not an option. See: indiscriminate killing.

That leaves the window. Deadpool leaps over the edge, dropping two stories and grabbing the edge of the rickety fire escape to avoid breaking his legs.

He's halfway down the block when the backdrop of Weasel's apartment moves, and a figure comes into focus, peeling itself off the vaulted ceiling and landing on the wooden floorboards with barely a whisper of noise.

Peter Parker scowls at the open window.

"Motherfucker."

Notes for the Chapter:

TFW Rykers never started out as a normal correctional facility in this new reality.